



Montreal's Ukrainian and Jewish Communities Hold Joint Holodomor-Holocaust Commemoration

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Suffering Honored

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Suffering creates a bond of understanding and compassion that can have the power to transcend social, national, and religious boundaries. And it was this bond that brought the representatives of the Ukrainian and Jewish communities of Montreal to a joint ceremony - held at St Mary the Protectress Ukrainian Orthodox Church on Sunday, 22 April, 2007 - honouring the victims of the Nazi Holocaust and the Soviet Famine (the Holodomor). For the first time in Canadian history Jews and Ukrainians prayed together for the loss both nations had endured at the hands of genocidal tyrants.

Every year for the last twenty-five years the Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Montreal has been organizing a memorial service for the victims of the Shoah at various Protestant and Catholic churches in the city as part of the permanent international inter-faith dialogue. For most of the pastors, priests, rabbis and invited guests, and members of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Montreal, among them the National Chair of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Dr. Victor Goldbloom, this year's commemoration was their introduction to the traditions of both Eastern Christianity and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In his welcoming remarks, the Chair of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Montreal and parish priest of St. Mary the Protectress Church, the Very Rev. Dr. Ihor Kutash, quoting Romans 12:21 set the tone of the event: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good'... [because] it is not evil but goodness and unity in diversity that has the last word in this world, which belongs to God."

In the Church Hall seven thick red candles were set out on a long table covered with a crisp, floor-length snow white tablecloth, decorated with one beautifully embroidered runner. To the sound of special prayers read by the Parish Council Secretary, Victor Zwetkow, the candles were lit one by one by the representatives of the Israeli Consulate, Canadian Jewish Congress, Ukrainian Canadian Congress, Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre and the Embassy of Ukraine.

As dignity-imbued as these moments were, it was the lighting of the sixth candle by the Holocaust Survivor, Yehudi Lindeman, and the lighting of the seventh candle by the Famine Survivor, Anna Melnyk, that caught at people's hearts. Like in the striking photograph from last September's memorial service at Babyn Yar in Ukraine, here in Montreal, a Ukrainian and a Jew stood united in remembered pain, united in the need to honour those who died.

In his homily, Dr. Alexander Melnyk, Chair of the Parish Council of St. Mary's, said: "It is

generally assumed, that politics, warfare and economic activities are the subject matter of history. To the prophets, God's judgement of man's conduct is the main issue; everything else is marginal. Prophets do not mince words... Isaiah writes (35: 7,8) 'The envoys of peace weep bitterly, the highways lie waste...witnesses are despised, there is no regard for man'. There is nothing that we forget as eagerly as the wickedness of man. The earth holds such terrifying secrets. The dead are buried and the crimes, forgotten."

Yet in the face of war, torture, persecution and genocide it is all too easy to question not only the effectiveness of humanity's efforts at fighting evil, but to question God's very existence. However, to question "if not His existence, then His love and care for us" is precisely the goal of evil, maintained Dr. Melnyk. So, how do we deal with that? "We answer evil through the practice of good, through music, through poetry, through everything that makes life richer and more meaningful. We answer through gatherings like today which keep the memory of those who perished and raise their existence, however brief or long it may have been...before God's presence in prayer."

As the last evocative notes of "Vichnaya pamiat" drifted over the solemn crowd of about 100, (sung by the St Mary the Protectress Church Choir under the direction of Claudia Melnyk), Hyman Gisser, cantor at the Congregation Beth-El said the kaddish, the ancient Aramaic prayer for the repose of the dead. When he ended, Rabbi Elina Bykova, a native of Kyiv who is now working in Temple Enamu-El-Beth Sholom in Montreal, read her own beautifully poetic Ukrainian translation of the kaddish.

Where did this kind of inter-faith gathering originate, one might ask? Basically interfaith dialogue was inspired by a 1965 Vatican Council document called "Nostra Aetate". This document radically changed the Catholic Church's teaching regarding the Jews by recognizing the validity of the Jewish covenant with God, by honouring their religious heritage, by banning prayers for the conversion of Jews to Christianity, and by inviting Catholics to engage in a dialogue with them. At the same time, under the leadership of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II ecumenic relations, that is relations between various Christian churches blossomed: the Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, Presbyterian Churches entered into dialogue via academic conferences and community work. This facilitated the development of the Jewish-Christian dialogue because at least all the Christians were now sitting at the same table. But by the end of 20th century the situation in the world changed. The politicization of religion in the Middle East and in the West, make it necessary to re-think the terms of inter-faith dialogue. Therefore, the International Council of Christians and Jews, an umbrella organization consisting of 32 member countries, is now involved in a dialogue with Muslims. For a better understanding of our society Christian organizations like the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism are now fostering dialogue with Sikh, Muslim, Bahai, Buddhist, and Aboriginal communities.

For Ukrainians, involvement in this peace-through-dialogue world movement is very important. As Ivan Dziuba put it last year in his speech at Babyn Yar, "History willed that the fate of the Ukrainian and the Jewish people is intertwined and it is up to them to answer the challenge of that history. To become for all of humanity an example of how to respect each other, to know each other, to understand each other, and to help each other - that would be our mutual good contribution to world history." And indeed, the first joint commemoration of the Holodomor and the Holocaust in Canada is a good beginning of that process.

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